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With just five months to go before Nicaragua’s next general election, key details of the contest—including when it will be held, and who will compete—are only now coming into focus after a long and unusual period of uncertainty that left some observers wondering if President Daniel Ortega had a surprise power play up his sleeve.

Typically, the Consejo Supremo Electoral (CSE), the country’s top electoral authority, officially announces a given election a year in advance, giving participating parties plenty of time to prepare their platforms and preferred candidates. For this year’s general election, however, the de facto deadline (November 2015) came and went with no word from the CSE. Several more months went by and still the authority kept quiet, prompting some to question whether there would be elections at all, or whether Ortega, now in his 10th consecutive year as president and 15th overall, was perhaps plotting moves to reshape the entire structure of government.

The CSE ended the ambiguity with an announcement, on May 6, that finally made the elections official. The contests will take place Nov. 6, and will be open to all citizens over the age of 16, CSE head Roberto Rivas, a close Ortega ally, explained. Voters will elect a president and vice president; 90 members of the Asamblea Nacional (AN), Nicaragua’s unicameral legislature; and 20 representatives for PARLACEN, a Central American regional parliament. Rivas offered no explanation for the CSE’s delay in announcing the contest other than to say that the time frame chosen in this case technically adheres to the law.

In retrospect, speculation about a possible hidden agenda on the part of the president—that he planned to replace Nicaragua’s presidential system, for example, with a more parliamentary one—may seem a bit alarmist. Critics can be forgiven, however, for being wary of the wily leader, given his proven record of game-altering political maneuvers.

More than a decade ago, he helped orchestrate a change to the electoral law that allowed him, in 2006, to win the presidency in a single round and with just 38% of the vote (NotiCen, Nov. 9, 2006). In the run-up to the 2011 election, Ortega used his considerable influence over the CSE and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) to sidestep a term-limit law that prohibited immediate reelection and capped at two the total number of times a president could serve (NotiCen, May 26, 2011). And in early 2014, the powerful president scrapped the term-limit rules entirely as part of a constitutional overhaul he pushed through with help from the pliant AN, which is dominated by his Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) party (NotiCen, Feb. 27, 2014).

Committed to the caudillo

Even after the CSE announcement, other major questions remained, not the least of them being whether Ortega, who turns 71 in November, would run for reelection, as widely expected, or step aside so that his wife, Rosario Murillo, could represent the FSLN in his stead. As the regime’s
communications head, Murillo already serves as a kind of de facto prime minister. She is also thought to be in better health than her husband, who reportedly has a heart condition.

As it turns out, the president will run again—for the seventh straight time dating back to 1984. The announcement came June 4 at an FSLN convention in Managua, the capital, where nearly 2,000 delegates voted unanimously to nominate Ortega as the party’s candidate. A win in November would give him a third consecutive term and extend his hold on power until 2021. It would be Ortega’s fourth term overall (he also served as president from 1985 to 1990) not counting his stint as head of the FSLN’s post-revolutionary junta government (1979-1985).

Ortega has not yet said if he will again choose Vice President Omar Halleslevens, a retired Army general, as his running mate. Some analysts suspect he may choose Murillo instead. The president did, however, answer another key query: whether independent, international observers would be invited to oversee the Nov. 6 elections. Speaking to members of the FSLN convention, Ortega lambasted observers from bodies like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union as “sinvergüenzas” (shameless people) whose only goal is to “interfere” in Nicaragua’s internal affairs. “We’re done with having observers here,” he said. “Let them go observe in their own countries.”

PLI ticket confirmed

Ortega’s dismissal of the international observer option drew sharp rebukes from members of the political opposition, who accuse the CSE of being openly biased in favor of the FSLN and have made election transparency a central part of their platform in recent years. “The electoral law calls for electoral observation. Ortega is thus telling the CSE to break the law,” Eduardo Montealegre, a former presidential candidate and one-time Cabinet minister who is now a central figure in the Partido Liberal Independiente (PLI), wrote in a June 4 Twitter post.

The center-right PLI, Nicaragua’s leading opposition group, finished a distant second in the 2011 presidential election, earning 31% of the vote compared with 62% for Ortega (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011). Its candidate, the now 84-year-old Fabio Gadea, charged afterwards that the elections were “fraudulent.” His claim was echoed by the local chapter of Transparency International (TI), which said the CSE’s official election results “don’t deserve any credibility given the systematic and intentional irregularities” (NotiCen, Dec. 15, 2011).

The PLI initially hoped to recruit Gadea, a popular a radio-station owner and on-air personality, for this year’s election as well, despite his advanced age and disappointing vote haul in 2011. Gadea declined the offer in April. His reason for doing so, he told radio listeners, was that “not one favorable change [had been made] to the CSE.” The party has instead turned to Luis Callejas, 57, an AN deputy, doctor and former contra fighter whose looks (he tends to have a beard and longish hair) have drawn comparisons to the fictional Chewbacca character from the Star Wars films.

In a convention held June 5, the PLI and its allies, including the Sandinista dissident group Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS), confirmed Callejas’ nomination as candidate for what they now call the Coalición Nacional por la Democracia (CND). His running mate will be Violeta Granera, a well-known sociologist and civil society activist who previously headed an organization called the Movimiento por Nicaragua (MpN). “Right now, the conditions for free and transparent elections don’t exist,” Granera told reporters June 5. “But those conditions aren’t going to drop
down from the heavens. We have to build those conditions, because I’m convinced that the only way to solve the problems is through the civic path, the electoral path.”

**Advantage Ortega**

Callejas, Granera, and their backers don’t mince words when it comes to Ortega, describing him as a power-hungry “dictator” who has run roughshod over the country’s principal government institutions while enriching himself and his family. “As a doctor, I know what it means to be healthy,” Callejas said June 5. “The Ortega dictatorship is a cancer, and it needs to be removed.”

To accomplish that, however, the opposition will need more than just tough talk. Polls show Ortega to be a heavy favorite, thanks, presumably, to Nicaragua’s steadily expanding economy, the government’s success at keeping crime in check, and other positive indicators. Besides attacking Ortega’s democratic credentials, in other words, the CND will also need to present a coherent political platform that promises a better approach to business, policing, and other areas affecting the daily lives of the country’s citizens.

GDP grew 3.9% last year, down from 4.7% in 2014 but still above the Latin American average of 2%-2.5%, according to the World Bank (NotiCen, April 21, 2016). The country’s murder rate, on the other hand, is down, at least compared to the other countries in Central America, including Costa Rica and Panama, which had intentional homicide rates of 11.4 per 100,000 and 11.1 per 100,000 in 2015, according to InSight Crime, a news site and research foundation (NotiCen, Feb. 18, 2016). Nicaragua’s rate, as reported by the Policia Nacional last September, is 8.6 per 100,000. The region’s most violent country, El Salvador, had a staggering 103 murders per 100,000 residents in 2015 (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2016).

Ortega’s opponents would also do well to resolve their obvious cohesion problems. For the 2011 election, the conservative Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), which governed the country for a decade, starting in 2007, refused to fall in line behind the PLI, instead running its own candidate, former President Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002), who finished with nearly 6% of the vote. The PLC looks to do the same again this year, but hasn’t yet clarified who its candidate will be. The party’s original candidate, Noel Vidaurre, dropped his bid in early April, reportedly because of a clash with Alemán regarding the latter’s wife, Maria Fernanda Flores, who plans to run for an AN deputy seat. Vidaurre opposes her candidacy.

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